Confusion at the White House

The Washington Post
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The Chicago Tribune
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LANDSLIDE
The Unmaking of the President 1984-1988
Jane Mayer and Doyle McManus
Houghton Mifflin. 488 pp. $21.95

Reviewed by
Robert Sherrill

Friday, Feb. 27, 1987. The White House was in frozen chaos. Donald Regan, chief of staff, had just been drummed out of his job by Nancy Reagan. Howard Baker, his successor, wasn't supposed to arrive for three more days. Until then, he was hiding out, taking no phone calls, especially from the media.

Washington reporters Jane Mayer of the Wall Street Journal and Doyle McManus of the Los Angeles Times pick up the drama at that moment. "One caller, however, got through: on the line for Senator Baker was the attorney general of the United States.

"'Howard,' said the voice on the other end of the phone, 'I think you better get over to the White House. Don Regan's left.'

"Baker listened, then tried to put Meese off: 'Ed, the problem is that the President doesn't want it out until Monday. I gave him my word.'

"The attorney general seemed not to hear. 'Howard,' he said again, slowly. 'I think you better get over to the White House. There's no one in charge.'"

No one in charge? What about the President? Wasn't he there, and wasn't he in charge? No way. The Iran-contra scandal was raging, and Ronald Reagan was in a psychological funk, addled, listless, unresponsive. All he wanted to do was watch TV and old movies. To some close to him at that time, he seemed to have no interest at all in running the country. The balloon of his great popularity had recently been punctured, and he didn't know how to cope. The President who had sworn never to make concessions to terrorists or to ransom hostages and who had damned Iran's government as "squalid criminals" had been caught selling arms and paying bribes to agents of the Ayatollah Khomeini in the hope that it might release some hostages. What's more, some of those arms profits had been passed on to the contra forces battling Nicaragua's Sandinista government, directly flouting Congress' will.

For years the generally gullible media had portrayed Reagan as a strong leader. But now suddenly he had been, in Mayer and McManus' words, "unmasked" as an easily manipulated, sentimental bubblehead "who didn't have the ability to understand what was going on."

Worse, the Tower Commission, set up to investigate the Iran-contra scandal, only days earlier had concluded that Reagan committed an impeachable offense by approving the sale of U.S. property for private profiteering and for the support of a congressionally proscribed war in Nicaragua, and then taking part in the biggest cover-up since Watergate.

The unmasking left him "physically and psychologically drained." He sat at briefings in a stupor. He would stop in mid-sentence, forgetting what he was talking about. He told the same long joke over and over.

Veteran political aide Jim Cannon, sent ahead by Howard Baker that weekend to scout the White House situation, was so appalled by what he saw and heard that he suggested Baker might want to invoke Section Four of the 25th amendment, which provides for the removal of a president "unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office."

But on Monday Baker decided that the old boy wasn't much different from the usual.

And Baker was right: Reagan's condition wasn't new. For at least two years, since his second term began, the "usual" Reagan had been president only in title and as a symbol. In reality, he had been a puppet, the willing victim of a coup d'etat staged by Regan, CIA Director William Casey and Lt. Col. Oliver North. All this and much more is clearly, exhaustively documented in *Landslide*. Mayer and McManus' devastating account of Reagan's second term. Buttressed by hundreds of interviews with administration officials, as well as tens of thousands of pages of testimony and other documentation, the book is a stunning piece of history, as readable as Theodore White's best campaign chronicles.

Although its prologue is set in that critical weekend in 1987, *Landslide* really begins more than two years earlier, as the White House guard was changing. Reagan's top first-term advisers — devoted men, such as Meese and James Baker, who knew how to concoct a "Reagan program" and protect the President from his worst instincts — were gone. Commencing his second term, Reagan had no program, his new top aides had little loyalty (and, many of them, little experience), and to satisfy their own vaulting ambitions, they were prepared to lead Reagan down extremely perilous paths.

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He proved to be easily led. He had few ideas of his own. This became evident in the 1986 midterm elections, when he stumped 24,800 miles through 22 states but "made only one tactical decision himself during the entire campaign cycle." It was Nancy Reagan, according to one White House aide, who "drew up all the plans. . . . He just went. He was pretty oblivious. He never knew what was going on."

Landslide's president is a mechanical rubber stamp. Two top aides — Baker as chief of staff and Regan as Treasury secretary — decided to swap jobs; Regan later recalled that many weeks afterward, when they finally got around to telling him, the President simply "nodded affably." Anything advisers stuck in front of him, he signed, often without reading it. Speech writers found he had "unquestioning acceptance of almost every line." Knowing Reagan's distaste for grubby details, his aides increasingly ran the presidency as if he were a senile appendage; they acted on their own, lied to him or just left him out. Typically, coming home from the Reykjavik summit conference, his counselors plotted ways to sucker the media into describing the failure as a success, but they didn't bother to ask Reagan for suggestions because he was happily occupied "in the midsection of Air Force One playing parlor games that involved guessing the ages of NSC secretaries."

The presidency, according to the authors, had fallen into a "receivership." One of the receivers was his wife, who controlled even the number of hands her husband was allowed to shake. Another was, of course, her arch-enemy Donald Regan, who, in the words of one colleague, "figured, if Ronald Reagan didn't want to be president all the time, he would be. Probably eighty percent of the decisions made during his era were made by Regan."

Each day aides supplied Reagan with cue cards telling him what to do, where to walk, where to sit, whom to talk to, exactly what to say even in phone conversations. He obeyed his cards diligently.

The public Reagan was hail-fellow; in private he was remote, aloof. He could not stand reality's unpleasantness, retreating into his own sunny make-believe world. Just as he refused to admit to serious illness ("I didn't have cancer. I had something inside of me that had cancer in it, and it was removed"), he also refused to concede that his administration was so riddled with vicious rivalries — as between Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and Secretary of State George Shultz — that policy was often deadlocked and incoherent.

Unlike other modern presidents, Reagan had little interest in foreign affairs. Mayer and McManus say that often in the middle of briefings by Shultz or Casey or one of his national security advisers, Reagan would drift off to sleep. Only because Shultz demanded it, Reagan gave him a private audience of one hour a week — one-seventh as much time as the President spent lifting weights. After the 1986 Reykjavik summit, Washington's policy professionals finally realized that "his untutored utopianism may have reached dangerous proportions" — for Reagan, in his secret meetings with Gorbachev, had offered to get rid of *all* nuclear weapons, not just some ballistic missiles. ("You couldn't have," a shocked adviser blurted out. "I was there," Reagan replied patiently, "and I did.")

The Reagan White House sounds a little like an asylum. Never mind that the President thought a ghost haunted the Lincoln bedroom and that his wife believed in astrology. What really mattered was that national security adviser Robert McFarlane was driven to nervous collapse, often bursting into heavy sobs; his successor, Adm. John Poindexter, was obsessively secretive, hated the media, considered Congress' laws "an outside interference" and sometimes seemed incapable of telling the truth; Regan, if opposed, would pound the table and scream; and North by mid-1986 was suffering mood swings "between manic boastfulness and paranoiac secrecy."

Balmy or not, the Reagan White House was certainly remarkably unconcerned about conflict of interest or the appearance of impropriety. Reagan "openly disdained the post-Watergate 'ethics in government'" laws, Mayer and McManus tell us, while Nancy Reagan accepted many questionable gifts, and pressured old benefactors to come across with more.

Considering the Reagans' own shaky sense of ethics, say the authors, it was natural that North was encouraged in sleazy tin-cup diplomacy; natural that Reagan let conmen use him in a sometimes fraudulent effort to bilk rich women of "anti-communist" loot; natural for the White House to do its illegal arms dealing through a disgraced CIA agent and an Iranian double agent who cheated both sides.

If Mayer and McManus have given us a balanced review of Reagan's second term — and *Landslide* appears to be both magnificently researched and laudably objective — one of our most popular presidents will be rated by history as one of our weirdest and worst. But why have these good reporters waited so long to tell us?